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SUBJECT: EU/TURKEY CONFERENCE TAKES SOBER BUT HOPEFUL VIEW
OF ACCESSION PROCESS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. ON OCTOBER 20-21 POLOFF ATTENDED AN EU-TURKEY CONFERENCE SPONSORED BY THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE AND ASPEN INSTITUTE-ROME THAT DISCUSSED THE CHALLENGES TURKEY FACES IN ATTAINING EU MEMBERSHIP. WHILE NONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS APPEARED TO DOUBT TURKEY WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME AN EU MEMBER, THE OVERALL CONSENSUS WAS A SOBER AND REALISTIC EXPECTATION THAT ACCESSION WOULD TAKE YEARS AND REQUIRE MUCH MORE HARD WORK THAN ANKARA ALREADY HAS ACCOMPLISHED. END SUMMARY.

ITALY PRAISES BUT URGES FURTHER REFORMS

12. (SBU) ITALIAN FINANCE MINISTRY UNDERSECRETARY OF STATE GIANLUIGI MAGRI, FILLING IN FOR FINANCE MINISTER GIULIO TREMONTI, STRONGLY ENDORSED TURKEY'S CANDIDACY AND PRAISED TURKISH PRIME MINISTER RECEP ERDOGAN'S STRONG LEADERSHIP AND DEMONSTRATION OF TURKEY'S MULTILATERAL COOPERATION ON IRAQ. MAGRI SAID ANKARA'S CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO STRUCTURAL REFORMS REMAINS KEY TO ITS EU ACCESSION. AS EXPECTED, TURKISH OFFICIALS PUT A POSITIVE SPIN ON ANKARA'S ACHIEVEMENTS BUT ALSO ACKNOWLEDGED THAT TURKEY HAD A LONG WAY TO GO. TURKISH SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE SECRETARIAT GENERAL FOR EU AFFAIRS MURAT SUNGAR URGED THE EU TO SET A DEFINITE TIMETABLE FOR ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS, HOPEFULLY BY THE END OF 2004, SO THAT TURKEY WOULD HAVE A DEADLINE AND A ROAD MAP. (THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL HAS PROMISED TO ASSESS AT THE END OF 2004 WHETHER TURKEY HAS COMPLIED WITH COPENHAGEN CRITERIA AND IS READY TO BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS.) TURKISH DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF THE ECONOMY ALI BABACAN ADDED THAT THE EXACT DATE OF ACCESSION WAS NOT AS IMPORTANT AS THE REFORM PROCESS ITSELF. BABACAN ASSERTED THAT THE ACCESSION PROCESS IS AN "ANCHOR" THAT HELPED GUARANTEE TURKEY WOULD NOT BACKTRACK ON REFORMS.

TURKS PUT IN A PLUG FOR ERDOGAN GOVERNMENT

13. (SBU) BOTH SUNGAR AND BABACAN GAVE ERDOGAN'S GOVERNMENT HIGH MARKS FOR JUMPSTARTING REFORMS SINCE ITS ELECTION IN 2002, BUT HE ALLOWED THAT SUSTAINING THIS PROGRESS DEPENDED ON THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GOVERNMENTS AND OF POPULAR SUPPORT (AROUND 70 PERCENT, SUNGAR CLAIMED). BABACAN SAID THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY WAS TO BE INCLUSIVE AND REACH CONSENSUS, IN SPITE OF ITS TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY IN PARLIAMENT THAT TECHNICALLY WOULD ALLOW IT TO IGNORE THE OPPOSITION. HE STRESSED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT INTERFERE IN RELIGIOUS ISSUES OR IMPOSE ISLAM ON TURKISH CITIZENS. TURKISH MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE RULING JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AK) REHA DENEMEC ECHOED BABACAN IN INSISTING THAT ERDOGAN "HAS NO INTENTION" OF WAGING A "TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY" AND WAS WORKING HARD TO KEEP THE PUBLIC TRUST.

VIEWS OF U.S./TURKEY RELATIONSHIP

14. (SBU) SUNGAR ASSURED POLOFF THAT TURKEY'S EU ACCESSION WOULD NOT AFFECT TURKEY'S TIES TO THE U.S. AND RELATIONS WOULD REMAIN STRONG. OTHER PANELISTS USED THE CONFERENCE AS AN OCCASION TO CRITICIZE THAT RELATIONSHIP. A PARTICIPANT WITH THE ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER ATTACKED THE U.S. FOR, HE CLAIMED, HOLDING TURKEY UP AS A PARAGON OF AN ISLAMIC DEMOCRACY, WHEN, IN HIS OPINION, IT WAS HARDLY A WORTHY MODEL FOR THE REGION. ANOTHER ACADEMIC WITH THE SAME INSTITUTION BLAMED U.S. POLICY FOR INDIRECTLY IMPEDING TURKEY'S FULFILLMENT OF ESDP BECAUSE OF ANKARA'S INTEREST IN MAINTAINING STRONG TRANSATLANTIC TIES.

ECONOMIC PROGNOSIS: GUARDED OPTIMISM

15. (SBU) MAGRI PRAISED TURKEY'S PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING THE IMF PROGRAM, REDUCING INFLATION (STILL AT ALMOST 30 PERCENT), AND LOWERING INTEREST RATES BUT ALSO CITED UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS: A HEAVY DEBT, AN OVERVALUED CURRENCY, AND A HIGH CURRENT ACCOUNT DEFICIT. HE NOTED THAT TURKEY'S PER CAPITA INCOME IS APPROXIMATELY 20 PERCENT OF THE CURRENT EU AVERAGE. THE PANEL ON ECONOMICS POINTED OUT ANKARA'S NEED

TO PRIVATIZE ENERGY, TRANSPORTATION, AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTORS, RESTRUCTURE BANKS, AND ENFORCE TAXATION ON THE "INFORMAL" ECONOMY, WHICH CONSTITUTES ABOUT 60 PERCENT OF THE WORK FORCE, ACCORDING TO ONE PAPER. THE PARTICIPANTS AGREED THAT TURKEY IS A LONG WAY FROM MEETING MAASTRICHT CRITERIA.

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16. (SBU) MAGRI POINTED OUT THAT TURKEY'S POPULATION ROUGHLY EQUALED THAT OF THE TEN ACCEDING COUNTRIES AND, IF DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS CONTINUED, TURKEY WOULD HAVE A LARGER POPULATION THAN ANY EU MEMBER STATE BY THE END OF THIS DECADE. ONE PANELIST PREDICTED THAT TURKEY'S ACCESSION WOULD SHIFT THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE EU FROM NORTH TO SOUTH AND TO THE MEDITERRANEAN AND WOULD OPEN THE WAY FOR OTHER MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES TO JOIN. ANOTHER ECHOED THIS SENTIMENT IN SAYING THAT, WITH TURKEY'S ENTRY INTO THE EU, THE EU WOULD BECOME A PART OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND BRING GREATER STABILITY TO THAT REGION.

CULTURAL FEARS IN THE BACKGROUND

17. (SBU) FEW CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS SPOKE OPENLY ABOUT EUROPEANS' DISQUIET OVER THE PROSPECT OF 70 MILLION MUSLIMS JOINING THE EU, ALTHOUGH AT LEAST TWO EXPRESSED PRIVATELY THEIR FEARS THAT THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES WERE TOO GREAT AND MUSED WHETHER TURKISH CIVIL SOCIETY WOULD BE ABLE TO MEET EU NORMS. IN ANSWER TO A QUESTION ON THIS SUBJECT, MAGRI STRESSED THAT EUROPEANS MUST OVERCOME ETHNIC PREJUDICE; HE SAID EXPANSION WOULD NOT BE EASY, BUT THAT EUROPEANS "HAVE NO ALTERNATIVES."
SEMBLER

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